

# Stronger Than You Know

WARDROBE STYLIST: Fiskani  
ASSISTANT STYLIST: Marc Koger for Fiskani Inc.  
CLOTHING: Shirt and pants by BCBG  
Sequined shoes by BCBG  
HAIR: Marie Brown Hairstudio  
MAKEUP: L'Sha

It's the news you never want to get, especially while you're out shopping. But that's what Tionne "T-Boz" Watkins was doing in the suburban Atlanta clothing boutique owned by rapper Bow Wow's mom when she received a life-changing call from her hematologist.

"Before he would tell me he asked, 'Where are you?' and I was, like, 'Just tell me. What? Do I have a brain tumor?'" recalls Watkins, 39, of that day in August 2006 when she learned an MRI showed a grapefruit-size tumor had been wrapped around the stem of her brain for about six years. She'd posed the question, but was not really ready for the answer. "He said, 'Yeah.' I still paid for my stuff, but my attitude changed. I know they [the store workers] were probably thinking, 'What's wrong with her?'"

She frantically dialed her mother's phone, but couldn't reach her for five excruciatingly long hours. By the time her mother returned the call (Mom coincidentally had turned her cell off while shopping in their hometown of Des Moines, Iowa), Watkins was hysterical.

"I just blurted out, 'They said I have a brain tumor' and started crying," she says.

The devastating news was just one more entry on a long list of trials that Watkins had faced in her charmed but challenging 30-plus years of life—tribulations that would have broken many and taken out most all together. She had always been in and out of hospitals due to sickle cell disease, a potentially fatal blood disorder she's had since birth. She'd also lost her band mate, best friend and "sister" Lisa Lopes, in a 2002 car crash in Honduras. Shortly thereafter, her marriage to rapper Mack 10 fell apart. (She claims he committed adultery and threatened to kill her.) But to paraphrase that powerful Maya Angelou prose, still she rose.

## TLC's Tionne "T-Boz" Watkins Opens up About Surviving a Brain Tumor, Why She Hid Her Condition on "Celebrity Apprentice" and Plans for a Solo Album

Written By  
Chandra R. Thomas

Photographs By  
Angela Morris

"I just didn't feel like that was my story," says Watkins between sips of a "Shirley Temple, no cherries" as she periodically plants kisses on the cheeks of her daughter, Chase. "I knew I had to survive and be here for her," referring to her precocious "mini me," now 9 years old.

"She's the best mommy," says Chase, pausing briefly from her tic-tac-toe game. "She nice and has been through a lot and I love her."

### D A M A G E D

After learning about the tumor, Watkins says, "the hardest part was those first four days, waiting for the results to see if it was cancerous or not; my nerves were shot."

Watkins met with a handful of doctors who refused to remove the benign acoustic neuroma. Instead they wanted to shrink it through radiation. "I knew that doctors

only practice medicine and that means just that; they're only practicing," she says. "They wanted to just zap this, but that could possibly burn more of my brain stem or grow back. I didn't want to end this getting messed up any worse. I urge people to educate themselves and ask doctors questions beforehand, like, 'How many times have you done this?'"

Fortunately, Watkins doesn't believe in taking no for an answer. As a teenager people told her she would never succeed as an entertainer. Her response: "Watch. One day you'll see me on TV." It's safe to assume that being a third of one of the best-selling female groups of all time qualifies as success. Later she was told that due to her health problems she would never survive a pregnancy; she kept the faith until her healthy baby girl was cradled in her arms, albeit three weeks early.

That same determination ultimately led her to Los Angeles doctors Keith L. Black and Rick A. Friedman of Cedars-Sinai Hospital and the House Ear Clinic, respectively. They thought brain surgery was possible and assembled a team of specialists.

"I have to go by my gut, and I could just tell that they had my best interest at heart and sincerely wanted to save my life," says Watkins, tears welling in her eyes. "That's all I wanted was someone to try."

It was promising news, but brain surgery is so risky that before she could even go under the knife she had to write a will and Dr. Black asked her to rank in order what she most wanted spared: hearing, balance or facial movement. "I said save my facial control first and hearing second, because you wouldn't be able to tell if I can't hear just by looking at me," she says. "I would have had hearing on one side. I told him to save my balance last."

She also made the heart-wrenching decision to hide her condition from her



daughter, who stayed with Watkins' "Aunt Wanda" in Atlanta while she and her parents were in Los Angeles for six weeks before and after the seven-hour operation in November 2006. "Right after the surgery my cheeks were so red it looked like I had red blush on, but my hair was combed, still in a bob and blonde, of course," she adds with a giggle.

The flight back to Atlanta later was torturous due to the air pressure on the plane, but Watkins suffered through, committed to making it home for Christmas. "I was in a wheelchair and had on big glasses; I was so bloated from the steroids people thought I was seven months pregnant," she recalls laughing. "It was tough; I had to sit up in bed 24 hours a day for two months."

Though her life seems to be playing out like a Lifetime movie with that Gloria Gaynor anthem "I Will Survive" as the soundtrack, she's the first to admit that bouncing back from this latest challenge has been a true test of faith. The basement of her suburban Atlanta home was converted into a classroom, where Watkins struggled to relearn walking, talking and blinking. The letters of the alphabet literally lined the walls, and even a simple gait was arduous as she battled for balance.

"I had bruises on my head from bumping into walls," the Grammy-winning performer remembers. "I didn't like to look in the mirror; my face was distorted. My mom said, 'This is something you're going through, not what you're going to be.'"

#### KICKIN' HER GAME

**W**atkins says during her recovery she considered ending her singing career, but her family and friends convinced her to continue. She's about 85 percent restored. Her journey inspired the aptly titled "Stronger Than You Know," a track that will appear on a forthcoming solo album still in the early stages. She plans to tour with Rozonda "Chilli" Thomas this spring, and a memoir is in the works.

"The lyrics say 'You can't do nothing to stop me./I won't let you try and drop me./It's gonna take an army of y'all to stop me./I'm going to show you that I'm stronger than you know,'" she says.

Determined not to become the guest of honor at a public pity party, Watkins also



kept her ordeal a secret while competing last year on "Celebrity Apprentice" and during a difficult performance with Thomas at the June 2008 BET Awards. (She was nervous about singing, dancing and performing spin moves in front of a live audience so soon into her recovery process.) The duo also performed together last October at the "Justin Timberlake and Friends" benefit concert in Las Vegas.

There have been regrets. Thomas wasn't at her side in the recovery process. "She had her own child to take care of," she explains, disappointment creeping into her voice. Still Watkins has nothing but love for the many who were there through it all, like her mother, pastor and countless family members and friends, including now ex-boyfriend San Francisco 49ers player Takeo Spikes.

"I don't think there's any mountain Tionne can't climb. Once she makes up her mind to do something she does it," her mom, Gayle Watkins, says. "She's encountered a lot; she'll cry about it, then take it from there. I admire that about her."


Nowadays her balance can be shaky, when she speaks sometimes her words get twisted around and her smile, though not nearly as lopsided as she thinks, is a bit crooked; but those effects seem insignificant, trivial even, in light of what could have happened.

"The whole process has led her to evolve and focus on the things that mattered most to her, like being a good mother," explains Dr. Black, who removed the tumor. "I think she was always evolving, but any time you face a challenge like this, it forces you to really look inside yourself and that's definitely what she's done." Sounds a lot like the lyrics to TLC's hit "Unpretty."

Watkins, who turns 40 next month, agrees. "Things that used to be so big seem so small when you're faced with not being here and you get another shot," she says. "Do you really think I care if you like my pants? That did not help me to walk and talk in that hospital."

Watkins and Chase head off to the studio for a quick recording session. She should consider a duet with Gaynor, perhaps a remix called "I Have Survived." ♥

*Chandra R. Thomas is an Atlanta-based freelance writer.*



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